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POTE: CUBA'S DICTATOR, WHO RULED AND DIED IN SQUALOR

By E. de Laureal Slevin

A CAREER that ran in a devious circle for forty years came to a close the other day in Havana. A chiaroscuro career, lurid with tragedy, dark with sordid scheming, tremendous in success and failure, was ended. Reputed a year ago to be the richest man in Cuba, this same man the day before his miserable ending declared the wealth which had cost him forty years of unremitting toil had not yielded him one hour of happiness.

Here was a strange, a sinister and a dominating figure, and a remarkable example of what can be accomplished by the constant, ruthless application of all one's power to a single purpose. "Ferve el Pote" (the pot boils) was his watchword; his motto; his invariable form of salutation, expressive of the constancy with which his mind dwelt at every moment upon money getting; and so he came to be called Pote (Po-tay), a name familiar to millions to whom Jose Lopez Rodrigues would have meant nothing—the name which appeared in the big head lines announcing the suicide of Cuba's most famous millionaire, the maker of other millionaires and the breaker of many, the man to whom all went for help in time or sorest need, to be given it or the coup de grace as best suited Pote's book.

Not more than five feet in height Pote had the powerful, thickset frame typical of the Gallego peasant. His large head was set on a very short neck between heavy, humped up, rounded shoulders, reminding one of a snapping turtle, a resemblance not belied by the cruel wide mouth and glittering little black eyes. His nose was long, thin and predacious. The coarse black hair which he wore clipped short stood erect like bristles, until grizzled and thinned by the years and driven back from the sloping brow and temples. Until, in very recent years, his large activities in the banking world caused him to visit New York, where he was forced to a certain recognition of the conventions, he went about Havana collarless, coatless and hatless, his costume consisting of coarse shoes, ill-fitting trousers held up with a narrow strap in lieu of belt and a blue "hickory" shirt. So attired he entered the offices of the leading lawyers, merchants, bankers and even invaded the presidential palace and the departments to give his orders to cabinet ministers who owed him money. So attired he received in his own house congressmen or senators for whom he had sent to demand of them legislation that he desired or to warn them against the enactment of measures contrary to his interests. They owed him money—in many cases their election—and they were compelled to do his bidding.

JOSE LOPEZ RODRIGUEZ was born in Orense, a province of Galicia, Spain, and emigrated to Cuba in his fifteenth year, fleeing from the hard conditions of the Gallego peasant life. In Havana for a while he worked with pick and shovel, but as soon as he could he abandoned such hard manual labor to work for an old second-hand book dealer, peddling the books from house to house. One morning his aged employer was found dead in his bed and young Lopez Rodrigues, who slept on the premises, was arrested on suspicion of murder, but after spending some time in prison he was released for lack of sufficient evidence to indict.

The widow of the murdered bookseller continued the business and Lopez Rodrigues, after his release from prison, returned to his old employment. One morning the widow was found hanging in her room, but no evidence being found to confirm a suspicion that there had been foul play a verdict of suicide was returned. By that time the young employe had saved up some money and he bought the business. According to a story published in one of the Havana papers the other day, Lopez Rodriguez about this time became intimate with a beggar woman who was reputed to have accumulated by her extraordinary skill in mendicancy no less than four thousand dollars, and he extended to her the hospitality of his miserable quarters, permitting her to share with him the floor of the bookstore on which he slept.

One morning the woman was found dead on her pallet of rags, but the savings were missing and Lopez Rodrigues was jailed on suspicion, but released for lack of evidence. It has not been possible for the writer to verify this story. The events related, it must be borne in mind, occurred some forty years ago, and though now referred to by the Havana papers as matters of common notoriety probably did not attract overmuch attention at the time.

The business of the bookstore in the hands of Lopez Rodrigues, who gave it the name it now bears, "Lo Moderna Poesia," soon began to show the effects of the energy and intelligence which later was to make its owner a multimillionaire. Living upon almost nothing and working tirelessly, he steadily increased his trade and piled one dollar on another until with the passage of the years his fortune grew to respectable dimensions.

When, after the wealth of Cubans had been drained by three years of revolution and embargo, the American fleet blockaded Havana in 1898, Pote—for by that time he had come universally to be known by his sobriquet—was able to acquire for cash large properties for a tithe of their value, and when the Cuban Republic was set up he was a rich man among men who had been ruined. The latter were compelled to go to him for cash which he alone was able to loan. And so it came to pass that many of those to whom the Government of the young republic was entrusted were his debtors—which he never allowed them to forget.

Collarless, coatless and hatless, Pote ruthlessly followed his destiny

WITH Cabinet officers, Senators and Congressmen in his debt and depending on him for further favors, Pote was in a position to dictate in many matters to his own advantage, and he was not the man to neglect his opportunities. Many measures were introduced in the Congress at his behest and passed; many contracts and concessions were awarded him. It went hard with any of his debtors daring to oppose his will, and they soon learned the superior advantages of obedience. Thus, in the formative stage of the republican state a system of graft, bribery and corruption was developed to take the place of the vicious Spanish rule from which Cuba had just been liberated, and the teachings of General Wood and the honorable men who had labored with him so earnestly during the first intervention in the establishment of honest administration were nullified, to the woeful detriment of public morality.

Perhaps the most important coup achieved by Pote in the first years of the republic was the monopolistic contract obtained by him for the printing of textbooks to be used in the schools, for it enabled him at once vastly to enlarge his printing and publishing business. The secretary of public instruction went to jail for the scandalous deal, but Pote went on prospering without interruption, in subsequent years obtaining the Government contracts for printing revenue stamps and lottery tickets, with each new contract enlarging his premises until now La Moderna Poesia, fifteen years ago lodged in an old one-story building, is a huge printing establishment consisting of a great edifice covering more than half a city block, with scores of linotype machines and the most improved presses.

Although Pote's rapid rise to wealth began during the first years of the republic, the great money lender could do no business with Cuba's first President. However weak and venal some of those under him may have been, the austere old patriot, Estrada Palma, who had learned abnegation and thrift in his country's first war for independence and the following long years of exile, during which he conducted a school in Central Valley, New York, was above the promptings of avarice, and the presidential salary of $25,000 was more than ample for his simple needs.

It was not until the presidency of Jose Miguel Gomez that the great captain of finance and master grafter found room for the fullest exercise of his abilities. Gomez went into the presidency with nothing but debts (estimated at $185,000), a fondness for display and a rapaciousness—scarcely second to Pote's own—which gained for him the nickname of "Tiburon" (the Shark), in the semblance of which animal he is always pictured, even by the cartoonists, of his own party.

President Gomez was a man after Pote's own heart, and during his administration the pot boiled more merrily than ever before. The national lottery was established and Pote got the concession to print the tickets. The printing of the revenue stamps was given to Pote. A new Jai Alai concession to take the place of that which had expired was granted and given to Pote. The construction of the Roque Canal was given to Pote. A bill was passed to renumber all the houses in Havana, and the contract given to Pote, who proceeded forthwith to plaster as many as four numbers on some houses and the gate posts of the same, at $2 per number, the cost of the blue tin plaque, plus the labor of putting it in place, being all of seventeen cents.

With money rolling in from these and numberless other sources, scarcely less prolific, it was only natural that Pote should look around for a bank in which to put it all, so he bought the Banco Nacional de Cuba, or a controlling interest in it, put out the then president, Edmund G. Vaughan, and putting in his own man, W. A. Merchant, forthwith proceeded to use the institution as his own private property, with the result that when the crash came last summer upon the collapse of the sugar bubble, it was found that the slips put in the cash drawer by Pote as memoranda of money loaned him—or himself—amounted to the no mean aggregate of $11,000,000.

But that Pote was not hogging everything, but was playing fair according to his lights, was evidenced by President Gomez's emergence in the brief space of four years from indigence to affluence, with a magnificent residence on the Prado, a no less costly country seat and a few millions—variously estimated at from four to seven—in cash, lands and securities.

Having for years gone about clad as in the days of his poverty, he continued the practice when the second American intervention began, but found he had made an awful mistake when he went to call in such informal attire on Colonel (now General) E. St. John Greble, who was supervisor of the Department of the Interior.

Greble passing through the anteroom in which Pote was waiting caught sight of the coatless, collarless man, and turning to the police captain who acted as his aide, demanded to know who that dirty fellow was. The police captain in an awed whisper informed the indignant Colonel that it was Pote.

"Tell him to get out of here and not to come back until he has washed and finished dressing," ordered Greble.

While doubtless he derived a certain satisfaction from showing by his informal attire the contempt that he felt for the well-dressed, well-educated men of high position whom he could buy and sell at will, there can be no doubt that he was also consulting his own comfort. Accustomed until middle life to going without coat or collar, these articles of apparel must have caused him discomfort. That such was the case was indicated on the first, and probably last, occasion of his wearing a dress suit.

It was a great event, the opening of the new Banco Nacional Building, and there was unlimited champagne, of which, there being no charge, Pote partook freely. When the reception at the bank was over Pote was induced by some of the bank officials to adjourn with them to the American Club. There also there were free drinks, under the influence of which Pote, tiring of the restraint he had put upon himself, tore his necktie and collar off and allowed his rounded shoulders to slump forward into their habitual slouch, ripping the dress coat from the nape of the neck to the waist, so that when later he was carried down the stairs and dumped into a coach he presented somewhat the appearance of a seventeen-year locust coming out of its shell.

POOR and ignorant through youth and early manhood, all his energies devoted to getting and saving money, Pote never learned to enjoy any of the amenities of life. Even the savor of good food was unfamiliar to him and he continued after becoming a millionaire to gulp down the coarse, ill-cooked dishes of a cheap eating house. During the last few years he lived in a handsome house which he had bought from the retiring Chinese Minister, in the fashionable residential section of Vedado, but he lived there in squalid dirtiness, with only a couple of servants and two or three chauffeurs. Since the change in his fortunes brought about by the collapse of sugar he had relapsed into his old habit of going upon the street without collar or tie, though still wearing a coat. And yet, with all his affected contempt for appearances and scorn for the opinions of his fellows, this hard, strong, ruthless master of men had his vanities. Scornful of the learning the lack of which had not kept him from making its possessors his slaves, he nevertheless sent over to Spain a goodly sum of money to obtain for himself a degree of "licentiate," and he who had gloried in slouching through the streets and up the stairs of the presidential palace coatless, collarless and hatless had himself photographed in cap and gown as the Licentiate Jose Lopez Rodriguez, and the pictures published in the newspapers of Havana and of his old home town in Spain. To his vanity as much as to his loss of money may be attributed his suicide, for a short time before his death he exclaimed to his most intimate friend, after inveighing bitterly against men whom he had made only to have them turn against him in his adversity: "They have robbed me, they have deceived me and every one is now laughing at me!"

WHEN Jose Lopez Rodriguez was found hanging by a twisted sheet from the balustrade of a winding stairs in his stately residence, the news of Pote's suicide was told under scare headlines on the front page of every afternoon paper in Havana.

There is no record that Jose Lopez Rodriguez was ever married, but in 1909 he made and placed in charge of a notary a holographic will bequeathing his estate to be held in trust for a natural son.

Meanwhile, a string of newspapers owned by a friend of the dead man are demanding the prosecution of certain officials of the Banco Nacional de Cuba and other men of prominence whom in a letter found on his body Pote accuses of despoiling him by forcing him to sign a document transferring to them twenty-five millions to settle his indebtedness to the bank of less than half that amount.

It is believed that after the payment of all debts the estate of Jose Lopez Rodriguez will be worth somewhere around ten million dollars, proving that it was not the fear of penury that drove Pote to end his life in the fashion by which his employer forty years ago had died and which marked the beginning of his own prosperity.

He called cabinet ministers and legislators to his printing establishment for orders

A Real Society Chorus Girl

By Margaret C. Jones

CHORUS girls who are former society debutantes are usually such only in the minds of their press agents. But in the case of Miss Suzanne Chase, of Washington, daughter of Mrs. Volney O. Chase and the late Captain Chase, the metamorphosis has taken place in actual fact.

The story of how Captain Chase, one of the most popular officers in Washington's most exclusive society, literally worked himself to death early in the war as chief assistant to Admiral Benson, director of naval operations, has been chronicled in many parts of the country. But the tale of how his pretty, black-haired daughter, Suzanne, left the limelight of society to dance behind the footlights has not spread to other cities, even through a press agent, as yet.

Suzanne's debut a few seasons ago after her graduation from the National Cathedral School in Washington was the signal for extra preening on the part of less attractive 'debs" and for the raising of critical lorgnettes by appraising matrons with eligible sons.

Suzanne's mother, before her marriage, was Susan Brown, a member of one of Washington's oldest and most respected families. She holds the place she does in society not through family alone, but also because of her success as a water-color artist, her paintings having won honorable mention at many showings.

Suzanne's older brother, Lieutenant Commander N. B. Chase, is a prominent figure in the naval set, and a younger brother will be graduated from the Naval Academy at Annapolis this year.

Even as a child Suzanne decided she wanted to "do something," and when, after a brief season as a feted debutante, she announced that she wasn't satisfied with being whirled from one social engagement to another, her family agreed to let her go to New York to study interior decorating.

Like many another girl, Suzanne had always had a secret desire to become an actress. Her study of esthetic dancing had increased her longing to go on the stage. Consequently the proposal of a girl friend that they try to get a "job" as chorus girls, coming when Suzanne was earning a meager salary in a New York decorator's shop, fell on fertile soil.

"We applied for jobs and got them," Suzanne explained, in relating how she became a chorus girl. "Oh, no, they didn't give me a tryout or anything; I just told them I wanted to get into the chorus—although I was scared stiff when I approached the manager—and they took me." And the interviewer quickly grasped the fact that she "got it on her face." She is of the stature most readily described as "petite."

As for Washington society, it talked of nothing else for months. "Suzanne on the stage! How exciting, and what a strange thing for her to do!" And when Suzanne was in Washington recently dancing in the chorus the boxes were filled with bevies of her former friends, who buzzed excitedly whenever she appeared. The men who used to dance with her filled the orchestra seats to see her dance across the footlights.

When she visited her family at their home on Riggs Place she had as her guest a chorus girl friend.

Miss Suzanne Chase, a society girl who gratified her ambition to "do something"

"I find most of the girls in the chorus very likable," she said. "They are nice girls, as a rule, though most of them are not well educated," and she added "that the reason she found chorus girls so companionable in many ways was that they are not artificial and are absolutely sincere.

"Artificial? Mercy no," she said. "Why most of them are so natural that they are almost 'back to nature.'"

But Suzanne feels that musical comedy will not be congenial to her as a permanent career, although she declares that she would find it difficult to forget its fascination as a profession.

No Eye for Color

"A FRIEND of mine," says a Britisher now in this country, "is a curate in a local suburban parish in England. Some little time back he went up to Oxford to take his master of arts degree, and the following Sunday appeared in the pulpit resplendent in his new master of arts hood. A few nights later he was dining in the house of a prominent parishioner and was amazed to hear his hostess pleasantly remark:

"'Mr. Blank, that new hood of yours doesn't suit you at all. I can't imagine why you, with your complexion, chose red of all colors in the world. A myrtle green or an old gold would have suited you much better and would have been far more effective. You men never know how to dress yourselves.'"